

The Travis County Boot Camp Program

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The Travis County Jail in Austin, Texas, has been plagued with severe overcrowding for the past several years. The principal cause has been the back-up of state-sentenced offenders in the jail, the result of a controlled admissions policy at the Texas Department of Corrections (TDC).

In response to this problem, Sheriff Doyle Bailey developed the first county-level boot camp program in the nation. With support from County Judge Bill Aleshire, District Attorney Ronnie Earle, County Attorney Ken Oden, and the bulk of the region's district and county judges, the program emerged in June 1988.

CORE's Beginnings

The "CORE" Program (Convicted Offenders Re-entry Effort) began modestly with twelve TDC-sentenced inmate volunteers. Three corrections officers with previous military experience were borrowed from existing security staff.

Admission criteria for the first inmate "cadets" were:

- They had never been to prison;
- They were sentenced to five years or less;
- They had not been convicted of violent crimes: and
- They were volunteers.

In the beginning, the program had few resources and little equipment. The staff designed the program at the same time they managed the inmates.

Cadets worked four days a week on parks and road projects, especially for the county in conjunction with the Public Improvements and Transportation Department (PITD), which initially supplied equipment for the work.

The CORE inmates also worked on a variety of projects for the city and for non-profit organizations. In one year, work done by CORE cadets on just the PITD projects saved the county \$86,680,

projects that CORE became involved with is fire-fighting. CORE cadets have been trained in fire-fighting techniques by the Travis County fire safety staff and through classes with other groups, such as the Texas Department of Parks and Wildlife and SETCO, a volunteer fire department. The cadets have helped extinguish a number of wildland fires in the Travis County area.

The initial CORE schedule resembled a military boot camp: up at 0400; exercise; breakfast; barracks cleaning; drill and ceremonies; and then to work. In the evening, the cadets prepared for the next day, studying and doing written assignments to work off any disciplinary sanctions they received during the day.

On Fridays, cadets were required to attend various programs, ranging from the GED program, mandated for graduation from the camp, alcohol and substance abuse counseling, to life and job search skills.

Travis County's boot camp program was developed to manage overcrowding caused by a back-up of prisoners sentenced to the Texas Department of Corrections.

Because the cadets were housed in low-risk rather than maximum-security facilities, savings in housing costs to the county taxpayers in the first year were \$354,570.

CORE Today

The CORE schedule today is somewhat different than in the program's beginnings. Instead of attending programs only on Friday, cadets now attend programs every day, in addition to completing their work assignments. This increasing emphasis on programming has occurred because of a recognition of the importance of support for personal changes, as well as discipline, among cadets.

In addition, CORE administrators found that cadets did not do well in going from a totally structured and controlled environment into one of freedom of choice and decision-making autonomy. Therefore, cadets near graduation now go through a "transition phase," which prepares them to deal with the responsibilities of re-entering society.

After this transition period, the cadets are placed on the Travis County work release program and given additional job search assistance. Like other work release inmates, they are then required to pay for their rent, fines, and court costs, and for restitution and child support.

The average sentence to the boot camp program consists of 180 days-ninety days on CORE, fifteen days in transition, and seventy-five days on work release. Most cadets are then released to their probation officers, who follow them in the community.

At present, a little more than a year after the program began, CORE is seen by the courts as a successful diversion program. Offenders who would otherwise be sentenced to TDC are sentenced directly to CORE as a condition of probation.

Separate facilities, consisting of a total of ninety-six beds for males and females, have been built at a cost of approximately \$600,000. The CORE facilities include an obstacle course and exercise area. The staff now consists of one sergeant, fifteen officers, and a clerk. This phenomenal growth could not have taken place without the support of Travis County officials, other county and city agencies, the citizens, and community volunteers.

Do Boot Camps Work?

Controversy exists over whether boot camps make a difference in preventing recidivism and getting inmates back on the right track. Travis County CORE staff, probation officers, and the cadets themselves think the program does make a difference. One reason may

be that cadets in the Travis County CORE program receive more programming and follow-through than those in most boot camp programs.

With the support of the staff, cadets have initiated a program for graduates called "CORE after CORE." This support group, formed of ex-cadets and staff, meets twice a month to talk about the challenges and problems of re-entering society. The cadets are even considering forming a non-profit agency to help other ex-offenders.

Travis County's emphasis on the importance on providing a continuity of services for those in the boot camp program will, we hope, ensure that the CORE program will be successful. In addition to looking at changes in self-esteem from the time program participants enter the program until they leave it, the program is being evaluated by the Travis County Adult Probation Department through a five-year follow-up study of recidivism rates among program participants.

For more information on Travis County's CORE Program, contact Captain Joyce Stevens, Travis County Sheriff's Office, at (512) 247-5378. ■